



Omega-3 Fatty Acids are Essential to Good Health

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

Did you know that fish-oil supplementation is currently recommended by the American Heart Association for prevention of ischemic heart disease (blockage of arteries that supply blood to the heart, resulting in angina and heart attack)?

Fish-oil supplementation also may prevent various inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. Further, there is evidence to suggest that fish-oil supplementation may help prevent Alzheimer's disease and various psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Initial interest in this topic was based on observational studies of Eskimos who had a low rate of ischemic heart disease, despite a diet high in fat. These observations spawned numerous studies that evaluated the role of fish oil in preventing heart disease. Researchers found that increasing intake of fish oil (which is rich in Omega-3 fatty acids) may decrease the chances of heart attack by 20 percent to 30 percent.

Supplementation may be accomplished by increasing your intake of "oily fish" such as tuna, sardines, salmon, mackerel, and herring, or through ingestion of Omega-3 fatty acid supplements. Omega-3 fatty acids include two key substances: EPA and DHA. ALA, also found in flaxseed oil, hasn't been shown to offer a clear benefit. As a result, we don't recommend that you take flaxseed oil in place of Omega-3 fatty acids.

Although the exact role of Omega-3 fatty acids in reducing heart disease and other conditions is unclear, it may relate to their ability to decrease inflammation. Reduced inflammation, in turn, might have a beneficial effect on atherosclerotic plaques, thrombosis in arteries and arrhythmias of the heart. There is mounting evidence to suggest that low-grade inflammation in the body may contribute to atherosclerotic plaque formation.

By the way, a new blood test (called the cardiac C-reactive protein or the highly selective C-reactive protein) measures inflammation in the body and might help further identify patients who are at risk of heart disease. We recommend the cardiac C-reactive protein test for patients who have other risk factors for heart disease—for example, elevated cholesterol—and for whom we are considering prescribing cholesterol-lowering medications.

Meanwhile, a debate exists regarding health risks associated with increased intake of oily fish, which may be a source of contaminants such as mercury. There is also concern that farm-raised fish might contain other contaminants such as pesticides. Experts recommend that women who wish to become pregnant, pregnant women, and nursing mothers limit their intake of such fish.

Fish oil capsules contain no mercury. We recommend that two to three Omega-3 fatty acid supplements be taken daily for the established benefit of heart-attack prevention and for other possible benefits, including those noted above. Some fish oil supplements may cause unpleasant belching and fishy odor, but “odor-controlled” Omega-3 fatty acid supplements are available. Alternatively, taking the capsules at bedtime or freezing them can minimize or even eliminate this problem.

Gerard L. Guillory, M.D., is board-certified in internal medicine and has been practicing in Aurora, Colo., since July 1985. As an assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Dr. Guillory is actively involved in teaching medical students, resident physicians, and nurse practitioner students. He has lectured extensively on the role of nutrition and disease. Over the years, he has fostered an interest in patient education and has authored three books on digestive troubles. He also has served as medical director of a Colorado-based health plan and as a health consultant to employer groups.